

Facilitating peer support between foster carers in the UK: An overview of three studies

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Some context setting

- Around 75% of children in out of home care in England are placed in foster care
- Long term foster care recognised as a suitable option for some children
- The local authority as the ‘corporate parent’
- Delegated authority
- Recruitment and retention rates of foster carers
 - Improving the capacity of foster care



Different avenues for peer support

- Peer mentoring or one to one support
- Groups
 - Coffee mornings
 - Support groups
 - Local Foster Carer Associations
- Online peer support
 - Facebook
 - Online forums



What does the literature tell us?

- “*Supporting Each Other: An International Literature Review on Peer Contact Between Foster Carers*”, Luke and Sebba, 2013
- Peer support can fulfil a number of support needs
 - Shared learning, advice and information
 - Emotional support and shared understanding
 - Appraising and reflecting on practice
- Some links to foster carer retention
 - Strain
- Less positive aspects:
 - Gossip
 - Negative conversations about social workers or fostering service



The studies

- London Fostering Achievement
 - Mayor of London's Schools Excellence Fund
 - Aimed to improve the ability of carers and teachers to raise the educational outcomes of children in the care
 - 'Education Champions'
 - 'Hard to reach' carers
- Head, Heart, Hands
 - Introduce social pedagogy into UK foster care
 - Underpinning principle of co-creation and equality of practice
 - Shared learning and practice groups

The studies

- Made to Measure
 - Families with children with disabilities
 - 'Pooling' personal budgets
 - Parent led commissioning through peer relationships
 - Online forum
- The Mockingbird Family Model
 - Constellations supported by a hub home
 - Due to report Summer 2016



Key findings: Peer Mentoring

- Undertook a range of activities
 - Development of tools and training materials
 - Trips with an educational element
 - Awareness raising
 - Guidance and advice on key issues
 - One to one support
- Key source of information and empowerment
 - Pupil Premium Plus
 - Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings
- Improved access to services for the children



Key findings: Peer Mentoring

- Very well regarded
 - Foster carers and Children's Services staff
- 'Someone who understands'
 - Provision of advice that works
 - Sympathetic rather than judgemental support
 - Focussed on strengths rather than difficulties
- Took time to establish
 - Engagement with Education and Social Care Staff
 - Very few referrals
- Access through groups
 - Reaching the hard to reach?

Groups

- Groups run by foster carers are generally well regarded
- Open non-judgemental environment
- Sharing experiences and advice
 - What works
- Attendance problematic
 - Low numbers
 - Practicalities



Online support

- Alternative and convenient space for carers or parents
- Limited uptake
 - Generally a source of information rather than dialogue
 - Discussions primarily initiated by the staff
 - Clarity about their use
- Low use of online services
 - Less convenient than initially anticipated
 - Use of Facebook and other social media platforms
- Gap in the evidence identified by Luke and Sebba, 2013

The challenges

- Accessing peer support
- Avoidance of the virtuous circle
- The limits of confidentiality
- Interface with the wider system
 - The corporate parent vs delegated authority

Questions for consideration

- What might facilitate more foster carers making use of peer support?
 - What are some of the practical steps that might be necessary?
- What models are available that have been found to be effected in other countries?
 - What models have been found to be ineffective?
- How can the interface between foster carers and the wider system be improved to facilitate peer support?

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